A Comparative Study of the Late Plays of Eugene O'Neill and Edward Albee

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Has Edward Albee already exhausted his creative talents? Whispers of this kind have long been heard both in critical circles and among theater-goers. His recent plays were not happily received by the American audience and were short-lived failures. His adoptation of Nabokov's novel *Lolita* was brought to the Broadway stage in March, 1981 but closed in ten days. His recent play, *The Lady from Dubuque*, was also received not so favorably.

In 1975 Albee received his second Pultzer Prize for *Seascape* and, in my opinion, in that play he attained to a height of artistic achievement comparable to that of Samuel Beckett. But after this successful play, Albee somehow declined in his theatrical fame. Two short plays which came after *Seascape* were not performed on Broadway but were staged "on the road" (by the Hartford Co. in January, 1977).

The purpose of this paper is to present some hypothetical reason for the temporary (so I wish) decline of Albee's theatrical fame. With this purpose in mind, I will, first, discuss his three latest plays: *Listening*, *Counting the Ways* and *The Lady from Dubuque*, mostly in terms of the themes and mood of the play, and will later compare these plays with three of the last plays of Eugene O'Neill, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. In this comparison I would like to utilize the theory of "the rhythm of kinship" recently presented by Michael Manheim in his *Eugene O'Neill's New Language of Kinship*.

Listening, which had been previously performed on radio in 1976, was a short play of the three characters of Man, Woman and Girl. Girl is supposed to be a patient of a mental sanatorium who is under the care of Woman, a lady doctor. In her sheer loneliness, Girl is trying to find the way to get out of this world "satisfactorily." She has lost her husband and a child, and her relatives have stopped visiting her, so "silence came down on her."[1] Girl desperately tries to die in "the best way." At the end of the play, Girl cuts her hand with a broken piece of glass and sits in the pool of blood dripping down from the gash and asks Woman to listen to the sound of her pupils widening at the verge of her death.

The main theme of this play is how to die. Grandma, with whom we have been familiar in Albee's plays since *The American Dream*, also appears in the memory of Woman and preaches the importance of death as a way out from the world where life seems like death. "We don't have to live, you know, unless we wish to; the greatest sin in living is doing it badly—

stupidly, or as if you weren't really alive, or wickedly..."[2] Grandma also kills herself in this play and her death is, on the surface, caused by the same reason which kills Grandma in *The American dream*. As Albee explained in the interview with Michael E. Rutenberg concerning the death of Grandma in the earlier play, "her death is really a departure from a form of life that is a great deal more dead than anything else."[3] The death of Girl in *Listening* is exactly a departure from her death-like-life and far more desperate and morbid than that of the earlier plays. Grandma in *The American Dream* is rather humorous and full of vigor and a kind of social critic who deplores the degradation of sense of value in America, but Girl is really struggling in the hell of despair. The heroes of Albee's plays often die at the close of the curtain; (e.g., Bessie Smith, Jerry, Julian, the husband in *All Over*) but their deaths are not so desperate as in the case of Girl. However, there is one relief for her: She is mentally defected and her consciousness is blurred from time to time. If one's consciousness is clear and if one knows the approach of a sure death, and suffers from the pain which constantly reminds one of death, how would one respond to the situation and how would one prepare oneself for the last moment? This is one of the questions Albee raised in his recent original play, *The Lady from Dubuque*. Jo, the heroine of the play, is suffering from (probably) cancer, and is surely going to die before long. The play begins with a midnight party in which three couples are playing "twenty questions." The participants of the party are rather bored with the game, or more correctly with the company. Sam, the host, wants to have his own way in contriving the game, and Jo, the hostess, is psychologically turblent; her words have some edge in them and she eventually ridicules or insults the guests. The guests are also pretending to be pleasant, and complain; "Where else can you come in this cold world, week after week, as regular as patchwork, and be guaranteed ridicule and contempt?,"[4] but they know there would be no other place to go. The host and hostess are also asking themselves why they invite the guests to their house every week: Maybe "because it's too much trouble to change it all, and because we probably do love them in spite of everything."[5] Boredom with a faint touch of friendship, this is the mood of the party. Then gradually the fact is revealed that Jo is on the verge of death and is trying very hard to endure the periodical attack of pain. All she can do is endure with the help of pills and drugs.

How can you save her from this living hell? Albee sends a couple of "dei ex machina" for her rescue. Elizabeth and Oscar are the couple, who somehow remind us of Tiny Alice and her Lawyer. Elizabeth claims to be Jo's mother, but Sam denies it. She says she came from Dubuque, Iowa. Jo's mother is supposed to live in New Jersey. "Who are you?" is the question Sam keeps asking in the way he plays the game of "twenty questions." When Jo, coming down from her bedroom, meets this lady, she rushes into her arms, but shows no indication that Elizabeth is her mother. In the arms of this enigmatic lady, Jo seems to be comforted, though oblivious of the lady's identity. She says, "Just let me die...please,"[6] and she will die in pain, howling from offstage. Carol, one of the guests, comments, "Jo thinks she's better. They make her think so."[7] But the audience is hardly persuaded that Jo is saved by this enigmatic lady sent possibly from the other world.

One more possibility of comforting the spiritual pain in facing death is hinted at in this play; that is, the true affection and love of a married couple. Sam deeply sympathizes with his wife in her agony of death. He feels the same pain when he sees his wife diminish each day and move away from him each moment. Sam begins to cry, but if Sam cries, Jo will cry. But Jo knows that if she starts crying for herself she might lose control of herself. Here a proposition is suggested concerning the attitude that one spouse should take when the other dies: "One theory is that dying first is kinder—showing the way...The other theory is that 'staying on alone' is the gentlemanly thing to do."[8] Jo even suggests the possibility of being buried together.

Albee has been writing persistently about this fundamental human problem of wife and husband since the start of his career, and in my opinion, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is one of the best and most comprehensive studies of the marital relationship of contemporary intellectual couples. Though Martha and George are always hurting each others' feelings by slinging verbal "pies," they love each other, and at least one of them needs the other. Both affection and hostility exist in twin in them, yet also a deep feeling of kinship exists between George and Martha. Even the foul-mouthed Martha admits that only George can make her happy.

The elderly couple we meet in *Seascape* are weary of life, and seek only a peaceful rest after the long journey of life. Charlie, the husband, just wants to do nothing. Nancy, his wife, is comparatively active and urges Charlie to do something: "We shouldn't give up until we have to."[9] The couple rely on each other and here also we feel a deep affection between Charlie and Nancy. They seem to be securely united and contented in their marital relationship.

When compared with these two couples, the relation between Jo and Sam is fragile and vulnerable, though they love each other. When Jo mentions the possibility of being buried together, Sam is shocked, and at the close of the play, Sam is denied his simultaneous death with his wife by Elizabeth, who explains the nature of death as something "done before you know it." Elizabeth expresses a skeptical view of everything, including the marital relation: "Everything is true, therefore nothing is true."[10] This skepticism about the conjugal relation is pushed to an extremity by Albee in his recent short play, *Counting the Ways*.

This play begins with the wife's question to her husband: "Do you love me?" The husband answers, "Of course," but he is dubious about his answer. He himself wants to know the answer but has no way to know except in "Counting the Ways." He pulls the petals from a rose while reciting, "She loves me." "She loves me not." The wife is more straightforward; she deplores the decline in sexual potency of her husband and anticipates the end of their spiritual love with the decline of physical love. She asks him, "If you love me, how do you know you love me?" The husband tries to answer the question setting himself in an imaginary emergency when some fellow with a machete breaks into the house, "would he protect his wife or try to save himself?" He utters, "Damned if I know! Protect you, probably—if the old animal instinct was working; give it a split-second of civilized thought, of course, and who's

to say!?"[11] At the end of the play the husband asks again, "Do you love me?" The wife answers, "I think I do." The answer is affirmative, but the tone is negative.

In these late plays Albee still pursues persistently his lifelong theme of love and death, and with his growing age, his concern now focuses on the response of the married couple to their approaching death.

These main themes of Albee's late play are coincidentally dealt with in the last three plays of Eugene O'Neill. In *The Iceman Cometh*, Hicky the salesman narrates at length the story of his killing Evelyn; he killed his wife because he loved her and wanted to give her peace by freeing her from the misery of loving the good-for-nothing husband. He says, "There never was two people who loved each other more than me and Evelyn,"[12] but he gradually came to hate Evelyn's illusion that Hicky is a good man in spite of everything he did. He began to hate her pipe dream and herself. He couldn't forgive her for forgiving him. Throughout his adult life, Hicky's love and hate has lived inside him. This twining of opposite, naturally exclusive feelings is what O'Neill found in the fundamental relationship between man and his wife and what he had been describing in various ways in many plays, such as *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *Welded* and *Days Without End*. This dualism of love and hate is also described in Albee's plays, and especially in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?. The love and hate of George and Martha are well amalgamated into genuine love and affection, and harmonized in a rhythm of kinship. But in *Counting the Ways* hate and love are not merged into one, but are still-born into cold antagonism.

Along with the dualism of love and hate, the death-equals comfort formula exists in Hicky's motives for killing his wife. Hicky admits, "And then I saw I'd always known that was the only possible way to give her peace...I saw it meant peace for me, too, knowing she was at peace."[13] O'Neill himself seems to have been cherishing a "return to death with peace yearning" since his early years. His heroes, starting with Yank in his earliest performed play, *Bound East for Cardiff*, are often comforted by this "yearning for death" in their miserable life. As D. V. Falk pointed out, in O'Neill's plays "the tragedy of life makes death less terrible and death makes life seems less tragic."[14] In *The Iceman Cometh* this pessimistic philosophy is more clearly described in the view of Larry Slade. Larry's philosophical observations are a seemingly endless series of variations on the single theme that life is helpless and meaningless, that death is best, that "best of all," says Larry, "is never to be born."[15]

After *All Over*, Albee's main concern is also death, and especially after *Listening* his view becomes more pessimistic. Albee also admits, since the early stage of his career, that death is a departure from the meaningless life, but the heroes of Albee's plays have not yet attainted to the peaceful resignation of Larry Slade. As Michael Manheim puts it, "there seems no meaning to life, whatsoever; and Larry 'from the bottom of his coward's heart' can say for the first time and mean that he is a 'true convert to death.'"[16] However, Albee's heroes cannot be true converts to death. They are still afraid of death though they find no meaning in life. Naturally their greater concern goes to the problem of how to get out of this world without

physical and spiritual pain. In other words, how can a man be "comforted" at the moment of death? Girl in *Listening* wants the woman doctor to listen to the sound of ceasing her organ. The couple in *Counting the Ways* are fearful of the decline of their vitality and hence the approach of death, and they seek "comfort" in the dubious love for each other. In the latest play Albee asks the help of an enigmatic lady from Dubuque, and the lady seems to have succeeded in comforting the dying wife and also in relieving her husband in his spiritual agony. But some doubt remains about the effeciency of these comforting methods. The audience may not be persuaded that the heroes are comforted and proceed to death peacefully. When the curtain falls in the saloon of Harry Hope's, the audience cannot anticipate any change in the life of the inhabitants of the Lower Depth, but the audience themselves may feel some change in their recognition of the meaning of life. The people in the play go off awakened to the meaning of life and come back disillusioned, but the audience may freshly be awakened to the "meaninglessness" of life, and this awakening gives a soothing effect to the mind of the people who live in the chaos of the absurd world. Can the audience feel awakened to the real meaninglessness of life by these plays of Edward Albee? The lady from Dubuque preaches the meaninglessness of life, but her sermon is not so persuassive as that of Larry Slade. The audience has only awakened to the inadequency of Albee's solution.

At the end of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, after the nightlong holding of Tyrone's head on her lap, Josie tenderly and sadly wishes for his peaceful death. Josie says, "May you have your wish and die in your sleep, Jim, darling. May you rest forever in forgivness and peace."[17] Josie's feeling is genuine, so the audience is infused with the same genuine sympathy and easily persuaded of the certainty of Tyron's relief. In this play, there is a flow of feeling of mutual love and understanding. If we use the term coined by Michael Manheim, we feel the "rhythm of kinship." But in the last three plays of Edward Albee, the rhythm of kinship is hardly heard. In some of Albee's plays there exists the feeling of kinship, especially in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? In the antagonistic confrontation of George and Martha, we feel a genuine kinship under the disguise of their verbal fight of love and hate. And in this respect, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? can be compared to *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The antagonism of James and Mary may well be said to be an antecedent of that of George and Martha. The endings of these two plays are hardly happy, and there are no solutions to the problems. After the curtain closes, these couples will repeat the same cycle of life and will grope through the human hell of despair, but still there is some hope or assurance which the audience can feel without knowing the reason. There is a tone suggestive of man's capacity to survive under the worst emotional circumstances. Talking about *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Manheim maintains that "it is a play which sees in human kinship man's sole means of survival in the vast night that both man's reason and his ideals have led him to."[18] And the same, I think, holds true for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?. This feeling of kinship under the dualism of love and hate reappears in *Seascape* in the relation of the elderly couple of Charlie and Nancy. Though there is some antagonism and discrepancy of feeling in this couple, the underlying philosophy is rather affirmative. The atmosphere of the play

may be labelled as an Indian summer before the nihilistic winter days of Albee's world. In fact, after this Indian summer Albee went into a desolate winter landscape. In the three plays I have discussed in this paper, the rhythm of kinship disappears. This lack of genuine affection makes these plays nihilistic and cynical. And this, I believe, is responsible for the failure of his plays and the decline of his theatrical fame.

Now comes a question as to the reason and causes of the disappearance of the rhythm of kinship in Albee's plays after *Seascape*.

In the case of Eugene O'Neill, according to Manheim, kinship might be lost in the plays of the middle period, and in these plays the plot becomes rather conspicuous and the life force of the play is missing. The development of the play becomes awkward and wooden. The causes for this are the playwright's autobiographical facts and his personal experiences, such as the deaths in his family and the marital relations with his wives. If this assumption holds true in the case of Albee, then we may ask, what personal experience has been affecting Albee's creative life? To my regret, I am not in a position to answer this question due to ignorance of his biographical facts.

The rhythm of kinship returns to O'Neill in *The Iceman Cometh*, in writing which O'Neill is said to have confronted very seriously his own life-long problems, especially concerning death. Therefore I presume with genuine hope that Albee's theatrical fame will return if he regains the rhythm of kinship in his play by serious confrontation with his own problems.

Notes

1) Edward Albee, *Listening*, in Volume III of *Edward Albee The Plays* (New York, Atheneum, 1982) p. 142.
2) *Listening*, p. 110.
3) Michael E. Rutenberg, *Edward Albee Playwright in Protest* (New York, DBS Publication, Inc., 1969) p. 76.
4) Edward Albee, *The Lady from Dubuque* (New York, Atheneum, 1980) p. 30.
5) *The Lady from Dubuque*, p. 48.
6) *The Lady from Dubuque*, p. 156.
7) *The Lady from Dubuque*, p. 154.
8) *The Lady from Dubuque*, p. 67.
9) Edward Albee, *Seascape*, (New York, Atheneuum, 1975) p. 25.
10) *The Lady from Dubuque*, p. 160.
11) Edward Albee, *Counting the Ways* in Volume III of *Edward Albee The Plays*, p. 50.
12) Eugene O'Neill, *The Iceman Cometh*, (London, Jonathan Cape, 1958) p. 201.
13) *The Iceman Cometh*, p. 207.
14) Doris V. Falk, *Eugene O'Neill and The Tragic Tention* (New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1958) p. 20.
15) Michael Manheim, *Eugene O'Neill's New Language of Kinship*, (Syracuse University Press, 1982) p. 137.
About four lines are quoted from this page without quoation marks.
16) Michael Manheim, p. 142.
17) Eugene O'Neill, *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1953) p. 156.
18) Michael Manheim, p. 165.